

The Current Status of Volunteer Activities and Volunteer Coordination in Japan

(Excerpted with permission from the report published in 2001 by the Osaka Voluntary Action Center; Kita-Ku, Osaka, Japan)

People have always been involved in voluntary social activities, regardless of the country or the era. Throughout Japan's long history as well, there have been many prominent individuals active in the field of social activities. Particularly over the past ten years or so, however, more and more ordinary citizens are becoming involved in such social participation activities as a regular part of their day-to-day lives...

The fact remains, however, that the ratio of individuals actually participating in social activities is around 27% (1996 Basic Survey of Social Lifestyles; approx. 33 million persons), or around half that of England and the United States, where the ratio of participation is over 50%. In other words, there is a gap between the desire to participate in such activities and actual participation. The question of how to close this gap has become one of the key issues in terms of Volunteer Management. Among the 27% mentioned above, many people—particularly those involved in activities on a continuing or organized basis—are registered with Volunteer Centers.

Nearly all municipalities in Japan have a Council of Social Welfare, and around 90% of these operate volunteer centers. (Aside from these Councils of Social Welfare, there are also independently operated volunteer centers.) ... There are currently about 3,000 volunteer centers in Japan, even counting only those set up at The National Council on Social Welfare...

The first Volunteer Center (known at that time as a "Goodwill Bank") was established in 1962 in Tokushima Prefecture, and these organizations later spread throughout the

country. The shift to "Volunteer Centers" began in 1968, and a nationwide network of persons specialized in volunteer coordination at volunteer centers was established in 1973, having been given impetus by operation subsidies from the Ministry of Health and Welfare. As these changes progressed, full-time staff specialized in volunteer coordination gradually came to be stationed at the Centers. In the background to this development were aggressive assistance operations going at a national level; even now most Social Welfare Councils rely on grants from national, prefectural, or municipal governments as their main source of funds. The stationing of "professional volunteer coordinators" throughout the country was made possible largely due to the promotion policies of these centers.

The central operations of the Social Welfare Council Volunteer Centers include: providing volunteer-related information; organizing seminars and other events for introduction of volunteering; offering advice and support regarding volunteer activities from individuals and groups; maintenance and rental of necessary equipment such as printing machines and wheel chairs; supporting insurance coverage during volunteer activities and assisting with other forms of accident prevention; creating networks for related organizations; and survey/research activities...

VOLUNTEER COORDINATORS BEGIN TO DRAW ATTENTION

As we have discussed in the earlier sections, volunteer activities have been expanding in recent years in Japan, in a diverse range of fields and involving a wide variety of age

groups. Substantial impetus was added to this trend by the experience surrounding the Kobe Earthquake of 1995, with an increased awareness of the need for volunteer coordination. Along with these changes came a call for the establishment of specialized skills and the placement of volunteer coordinators as paid staff that would take respons[ibility] for these volunteer coordination activities...

Special Characteristics of the “Volunteer Coordinator” in Japan

Terms such as “Volunteer Manager,” “Volunteer Director,” “Volunteer Administrator,” and “Volunteer Organizer,” which are relatively common in the United States, are rarely used in Japan. The general term “Volunteer Coordinator” is used to describe all these positions. The “Coordinator” can be divided into the following three types ...

- *Affiliated with Intermediary Organizations (Volunteer Center, etc.)*
Main role is to match persons wanting to become involved in volunteer activities with organizations or individuals in need of volunteers. Takes responsibility for gathering and providing required information, and for conducting volunteer training, etc.
- *Affiliated with Organizations Accepting Volunteers (Welfare Facilities, Hospitals, Museums and NPOs [Non-profit Organizations]/NGOS)*
Responsible for a range of activities related to volunteer management, including: volunteer program development, volunteer recruitment, receiving applicants/interviews/placement, orientation and training, supervision, evaluation meetings, and program evaluation.
- *Affiliated with Organizations that Dispatch Volunteers (schools, companies, etc.)*
With a clear grasp of the needs of the members of the organization in question in terms of targeted volunteer activities, these centers seek out and introduce appropriate locations for activities that

match these needs, and also provide opportunities for preparatory and follow-up training.

Among the three types noted above, the placement of volunteer coordinators in Intermediary Organizations is comparatively advanced. Notably, specialized, paid coordinators have come to be placed in volunteer centers in the social welfare field, and social awareness has also progressed. There has been little progress either within organizations or in society as a whole, however, with regard to specialized positions in other fields and organizations. While there are paid volunteer managers in social welfare facilities and hospitals, the fact remains that in most cases these individuals carry out other functions at the same time.

A network organization was created for persons in specialized volunteer coordination positions in an effort to resolve this issue—namely, the Japan Volunteer Coordinator Association (JVCA), which was established in January 2001. The Association, which is comprised of front-line Volunteer Coordinators involved in activities in a wide range of fields, was established to improve the specialized skills of coordinators, and to promote greater social awareness. Attention will be focused on the Association’s activities in coming months and years.

The First Appearance of the Volunteer Coordinator

At the beginning of the 1970s, a hospital volunteer group provided an introduction to the concept and functions of the Volunteer Coordinator position as it existed in American hospitals. As we have already noted, volunteer activities in Japanese hospitals and other facilities were on the increase, but because the staff in charge of volunteer activities at each of these organizations was not clearly defined, there were communication breakdowns between the organizations and the volunteers, and in many cases this created

a barrier to effective volunteer operations. In response to this issue, the “Osaka Volunteer Association,” Japan’s longest-standing civic volunteer center, began offering “Volunteer Training Courses” in 1976. This was the first time the term Volunteer Coordinator was used publicly in Japan.

Trends Over the Next 25 Years

The latter half of the 1970s saw the first debates on the need for Volunteer Coordinators. From this period, persons involved in the welfare field were drawing attention to the need for Volunteer Coordinators in welfare facilities and hospitals.

In the 1980s, Volunteer Centers operating in Social Welfare Councils proliferated, and Volunteer Center staff began holding independent study meetings in Tokyo and Osaka.

In the 1990s, several texts were published with regard to the role and responsibilities of the Volunteer Coordinator, and a series of reports were presented by government-level committees encouraging the promotion of volunteer participation in the fields of Social Service and Lifelong Education. The Kobe Earthquake of 1995 also brought about a greater overall social awareness of the need for Volunteer Coordinators. Based on the government reports that followed, placement of Volunteer Coordinators began to take place in social education facilities. It was also around this time that progress was seen in the establishment of training systems and the creation of educational materials targeting Volunteer Coordinators in the Social Services field.

Since then, in keeping with the organized growth of NPOs and NGOs in such fields as overseas assistance, international exchanges, and the environment, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of Volunteer Coordinator functions, training systems and universal Volunteer Coordinator theories that are compatible with civic activities in a wide range of fields. Thus began the preparations for the establishment of the “Japan Volunteer Coordinators Association”—a national associ-

ation of Volunteer Coordinators from widely varying fields and organizations.

CURRENT STATUS AND ISSUES RELATED TO VOLUNTEER COORDINATORS

Volunteer Coordination in Intermediary Organizations

In 1985, the Ministry of Health and Welfare began the “Voluntopia Operations,” promoting the establishment of Volunteer Centers in Social Welfare Councils throughout Japan, and at the same time began gradually increasing the number of Volunteer Coordinators working as paid employees. Then, from 1994, the ministry began its “Municipal Volunteer Center Operations,” promoting the establishment of Volunteer Centers at the municipal level. As a result, as of 1998, there were over 3,000 Social Welfare Council Volunteer Centers, 68% of which had Volunteer Centers working as paid staff. Over the past ten years there has been a growing trend toward making Volunteer Coordinators paid employees, but because these coordinators were not considered “specialists,” very often these placements are rearranged as a result of personnel shifts within the Social Welfare Councils.

In the midst of increasing numbers of Volunteer Coordinators, a training system was created at Social Welfare Councils nationwide in the late 1990s, targeting Volunteer Coordinators at volunteer centers. A training program totaling 138.8 hours was thus implemented at Social Welfare Councils on the Prefectural level.

Volunteer Coordinators in Organizations Accepting Volunteers

Hospitals and other welfare facilities began accepting volunteers shortly after WWII, but over 90% of Volunteer Coordinators as these locations carried other responsibilities as well, and their positioning in the organization remains unclear to this day. For this reason, many of these individuals do not receive training as Volunteer Coordinators.

Entering the 1970s, NGOs and other organizations involved in overseas assistance began actively accepting volunteers; the same was true of NGOs in the field of environmental protection starting in the 1980s. There has been further progress in this regard in the 1990s and beyond social education facilities (museums, etc.), but because most of these are public facilities, while the persons in charge of volunteer coordination are paid employees, there is still a problem in that transfers are frequent, which hinders progress in the accumulation of know-how...

Each of the individual facilities and organizations had accumulated its own unique know-how relating to Volunteer Coordination, but this had not reached the point of building a common methodology for Volunteer Coordination ... that could be applied to all organizations accepting volunteers.

The situation in "grass-roots" NPOs and NGOs is much the same. The operational foundations for these organizations are still quite frail, and very few have full-time, paid Volunteer Coordinators. For this reason, while there are strong needs for acceptance of volunteers as a presence to motivate and support paid staff who are few in numbers, and while there is a very strong desire for improved cooperation in the work environment, in reality there are many problems surrounding cooperative work with volunteers, and at present the process of repeated trial and error with regard to Volunteer Management is still ongoing.

Organizations that Dispatch Volunteers

In the 1980s, some companies—notably large corporations—began investigations into the functions of Volunteer Coordination, and established positions for persons in charge of social contribution activities as well as divisions responsible for corporate volunteer activities. The staff involved, however, did not have such a great awareness of being "Volunteer Coordinators."

Since the last half of the 1970s, an increas-

ing number of schools—"Welfare Promotion Schools" or "Volunteer Promotion Schools" that include elementary, junior high, and high schools throughout the country—began focusing energies on volunteer activities as a form of extracurricular activity. Furthermore, since the latter half of the 1990s studies have been conducted with regard to incorporating volunteer activities into mainstream of the school education curriculum (time for comprehensive studies), drawing attention to the issue of volunteer coordination in schools as well.

At the same time, amidst the educational reform being promoted by the government, an emphasis on having students learn through volunteer experiences has brought with it an increasing need for volunteer coordinators in schools. Because the teachers in charge of these activities have never received volunteer coordination training, however, there are currently many cases in which problems arise between the schools and the NPOs/NGOs accepting these students in a volunteer capacity.

Through this report, we have introduced some of the characteristics of the Volunteer Coordinator in Japan, with a focus on a comparison with the functions of the Volunteer Centers in the United States. Even so, there are many aspects of this field that require further study, because the approaches to Volunteer Coordination in Japan are many and varied. This type of research is still in its earliest stages, and we recognize the need for continued research, and the need to make more extensive information available to the individuals and organizations to which it will be of value.